

III. The origin of prophetism in Israel

A. Alleged analogies to Israel's prophetism in other nations.

It is often asserted that analogies to the phenomena of prophecy in Israel can be found among other peoples and nations in the Ancient Near East. Some scholars have then attempted to explain the phenomena of Israel's prophets as a derivative from these sources outside of Israel. In this way the origin of Israel's prophets is attributed to these analogous phenomena found outside of Israel.

Certainly one cannot deny that formal similarities may be found between Israel's prophets and the phenomena of "prophetism" elsewhere. Many types of customs, ideas, religious phenomena, and institutions, etc. that existed in Israel do have formal analogies among other peoples and nations. But even if formal similarities may exist, one can question whether or not this suggests any necessary connection between Israel's prophecy and that of surrounding nations.

In view of the fact that Israel's prophets were men chosen by God to bring his special revelation, we may speak of "historical connections" only in a very limited sense. Derivation would seem to be excluded by the very nature of what the prophetic function in Israel was. Yet God does speak to human beings in the context of the culture and thought forms of those to whom he addresses his message. There are many phenomena in the Old Testament for which there are formal analogies in the ANE (sacrifice, circumcision, covenant, kingship, etc.). Should such a formal analogy present itself for the prophetic function, that in itself does not in any way detract from the uniqueness of Israel's prophets, which in its most important aspect is that these individuals did not proclaim their own words or ideas, but rather they proclaimed a message that was given to them directly by God. But then the question is, what kind of evidence is there even for such a formal type of analogy?

Most frequently, the similarities that are pointed to occurred in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan.

1. Mesopotamian analogies.

The most important texts for Mesopotamian analogies are those found at Mari in excavations between 1935 and 1939 by Andre Parrot. Mari was a prosperous city before the time of Hammurabi (ca., 1700 B.C.). Zimri-lim ruled in Mari until it fell to Hammurabi. Of the approximately 5,000 texts found in the Mari archives a few contain references to what some see as a trace of Babylonian prophetism.

a. Letter of Itur-asdu to Zimri-lim

ANET, 623, a.

Itur-asdu says that on the day he wrote the letter a man from Shakka, named Malik-Dagon came to him with a message.

Malik-Dagon said he had dreamed. In his dream he and another person went to Terqa (a place near Mari) to the temple of Dagon.

(The God Dagon is the same as the deity mentioned in Judges 16:23; 1 Sam 5:2ff., as the god of the Philistines. This deity was not a specifically Philistine god, but was a deity worshiped in many lands west of the Euphrates. The Philistines probably assimilated the worship of this West-Semitic deity when they settled in Canaan, having originally come from Crete.)

The letter goes on to say that when Malik-Dagan went into the temple in his dream the God asked him, "Did the kings of the Yaminites and their forces make peace with the forces of Zimri-Lim who moved up here?"

Apparently there had been encounters between the soldiers of Zimri-Lim and the Yaminites.

When Malik-Dagan gives a negative answer, the god said, "Why are the messengers of Zimri-Lim not in constant attendance upon me, and why does he not lay his full report before me? Had this been done, I would long ago have delivered the kings of the Yaminites into the power of Zimri-Lim. Now go, I send you. Thus shall you speak to Zimri-Lim saying: 'Send me your messengers and lay your full report before me, and then I will have the kings of the Yaminites cooked on a fisherman's spit, and I will lay them before you.' "

After Itur-asdu tells his dream to Zimri-Lim he advises him to follow the instruction of Dagan.

Some have seen in Malik-Dagan an analogy with the prophets in Israel. Malik-Dagan delivers a message from the deity that Zimri-Lim is to obey. It is to be noticed, however, that Malik-Dagan does not do this directly, but rather he gives the message to Itur-Asdu who in turn passes it on to Zimri-Lim by means of a letter. In addition it is said that the message ends in a prophecy of deliverance that is conditioned on the obedience of Zimri-Lim to the will of the deity Dagan.

- b. Letter of Kibri-Dagan to Zimri--Lim
ANET, 624, e.

Kibri-Dagan is the governor of Terqa, a place near Mari. He says that on the day on which he wrote the letter, an ecstatic (*muhhum*, cf., note 13) [priest] of Dagan came to him with the following message: "The god sent

[me]. Hurry write to the king that they are to offer the mortuary sacrifices for the shade of Yahdun-Lim" (shade = peace of the dead spirit). Yahdun-Lim was the father of Zimri-Lim. It appears that Zimri-Lim had failed to bring offerings for the spirit of his dead father. Kibri-Dagan, an official of Zimri-Lim's passes this message on to the king. He then advises the king : "Let my lord do what pleases him."

c. Letter of Kibri-Dagan to Zimri-Lim

ANET, 624, g.

The tablet is broken in two pieces and there is a gap in the middle. It appears to concern a message of an ecstatic of Dagan saying that the king, Zimri-Lim is to bring an offering for the dead on the 14th day of the coming month. Perhaps this is the same offering referred to in the previous text.

d. Letter of Kibri-Dagan

ANET, 624, f.

This text contains another reference to an ecstatic, but is even more difficult to reconstruct than the previous text. It appears that the occasion of the message is the building of a gate, apparently a city gate. Exactly what he says about the gate is not clear. Some say he is giving instructions for the gate to be built, others say it is a warning not to build it.

e. Conclusion regarding the Mesopotamian analogies.

Various students of these texts have argued that there are similarities in both form and content between the ecstasies of these texts and their messages and the prophets of the Old Testament and their messages.

Similarities in form:

- 1) As the prophet in Israel received his message from the LORD, so the ecstatic in Mari received his message from Dagan.
- 2) As the prophet in Israel brought his message unasked and with divine authority to the king, without determining in advance whether or not the king would like to hear it, so also in Mari with the ecstatic.
- 3) As the prophet in Israel was critical about actions of the king, so it is with the ecstatic in Mari.

Similarities in content:

- 1) It is claimed by some that the first letter to Zimri-Lim contains something that is comparable to a prophecy of deliverance in the Old Testament.
- 2) The words: "Now go, I have sent you. Thus shall you speak to Zimri-Lim saying . . ." are comparable to similar statements in the Old Testament. See, for example, Jer 1:7: "you must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you."

It seems to me that one may readily admit that there are some similarities between the Mari material and the Old Testament in 'form' in the cases mentioned and even some faint similarities in 'content' as well. Even so there are also great differences between the Mari texts and the Old Testament prophetic books.

Notice the following differences:

- 1) In the first letter Malik-Dagan does not go directly to the king, but rather to one of the king's officials, Itur-Asdu, who in turn sends the tablet with the message on to the king. In the other three letters the ecstatic goes to Kibri-Dagan, who passes the message on to the king in written form.

It is customary for the Old Testament prophets to deliver their message directly to the king.

- 2) Two of the tablets end with the statement "Let my Lord do what pleases him" (e, g.). This detracts from the authority and force of the message, and thereby distinguishes it from the message of the Old Testament prophets.
- 3) The focus of the message in the Mari texts does not concern ethical or spiritual realities, but only external cultic obligations. This contrasts with the Old Testament prophets who were primarily concerned with the moral and spiritual condition of the king and the people.
- 4) What is pointed to in Mesopotamia as analogous to the phenomena of Israel's prophets at the most reminds one of the false prophets in Israel. They appear to be no more than examples of the kinds of prognosticators and soothsayers found among all heathen peoples.

(Ridderbos: "When Israel's prophets bring a message in a concrete situation, we must notice the background to their pronouncements. While making detailed statements, they also relate the particular situation with which they deal to the great subject of God's purposeful action in history. The prophets outside Israel give no indication of knowing anything about such purposeful divine acts in history.")

Gene M. Tucker (1985, pp 346,347; cf., **CC p.4**) seems to downplay although not totally reject the strength of these analogies. Tucker refers to a study by Malamat and his caution about seeing parallels with the Old Testament:

"He saw them as parallel to the prophets of the OT in their consciousness of mission and their willingness to speak uninvited to the authorities in the name of the god, but 'the all-too obvious gap is apparent in the essence of the prophetic message and in the destiny assigned to the prophet's mission. The mari oracles address the ruler or his representatives - and not the nation as a whole - and express material concerns or local patriotism (208).'"

Tucker also cites (346,347) a study by Noort (in German) who is not at all convinced that the Mari 'prophets' were the predecessors of those known from the OT or even that the two were related. Tucker says, "In at least the last point he certainly goes too far, for the two are phenomenologically if not historically related. Whether or not one accepts his conclusion that the Mari oracles are basically unlike OT prophecy, he has presented a very useful analysis of the various means of revelation at Mari and the roles of both the speakers and their addressees. The messages are quite diverse, but they have in common the communication of a word of a god in a situation of crisis." All in all this does not seem too significant.

2. Egyptian analogies

Some scholars have also pointed to alleged analogies to prophetism in Israel in certain Egyptian texts.

a. The Admonitions of Ipu-wer (ANET, 441-444).

The text dates from the time of the 19th or 20th dynasty in Egypt (ca., 1350-1100 B.C.), but is a copy. The original text was much older, probably from about 2,000 B.C. The beginning and end of the text is missing, and what is left has many lacunae. Yet, it is still rather clear what it is about.

A man called Ipu-wer appears before the reigning Pharaoh and sums up the disasters that have come over the land of Egypt (see, p. 441). Everywhere there is robbery and revolution. Foreigners control the land. The Nile has overflowed its banks. Women do not conceive. Everyone wears dirty clothes. There is lack of water, because the water that there is cannot be drunk. The land is desolate. There is great suffering. In the structure of society, roles have been reversed. Slaves now have slaves themselves. Rich people are now poor. Those who previously did not even sleep on a board now have a bed. Those who had beautiful clothes, now walk in rags, and those who never had clothes are the owners of fine linen.

After Ipu-wer has described the so much better past, and after a break in the text, there is a section that some consider as a 'messianic prophecy' (p. 443): "It shall come that he brings coolness upon the heart. Men shall say: 'He is the herdsman of all men. Evil is not in his heart. Though his herds may be small, still he has spent the day caring for them' Would that he might perceive their character from the first generation! Then he would smite down evil; he would stretch forth the arm against it; he would destroy the *seed* thereof and their inheritance "

It seems clear that Ipu-wer is speaking of an ideal king. The question is whether he is speaking of a king of the past, or of a king of the future. This question is not easily answered because there are breaks in the text both before and after this section.

There are three major published translations of the text:

- 1) H. Ranke, AOTB (Altorientalische Texte und Bilder zum A.T., 1926, p. 51ff. - the standard German translation of the text)
- 2) J. A. Wilson (ANET, p. 441 - the standard English translation of the text)
- 3) N. Shupak (The Context of Scripture, Brill, 1997, pp. 93ff - this is the most recent English translation)

Wilson chooses the future and the opinion that 'the passage is truly messianic and that Ipu-wer is looking forward to the god-king who will deliver Egypt from her woes' (note 36, p. 443).

Ranke chooses the past, and in his note says that the translation by a perfect is not completely certain, but it is certain that it should not be future ("He had brought coolness upon the heart").

Shupak (p. 97) translates the passage in the past tense: "He has brought coolness upon the heat," and in note 34 says: "The following section is very problematic and has been discussed at length in research. Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether we are dealing here with criticism directed to god Re. . . or with a description of an ideal redeemer (see *ANET* 443 n.36). The translation given here assumes that the main part of the section is indeed addressed to Re and goes back to primeval times, since some of the details presented here . . . accord with the famous myth about the 'Destruction of Mankind' . . . But some lines . . . undoubtedly refer to the image of the redeemer king, a motif characteristic of this literary genre appearing also in 'The Prophecies of Neferti.' "

Often, however, the text is translated as future and then it is claimed that just as Israel's prophets described a coming Messiah, so also these Admonitions of Ipu-wer contain a messianic prophecy.

It is pointed out that just as this Egyptian messiah is pictured as a shepherd, so also is Israel's messiah (cf., Ez 34:23). In a section that ANET omits at the end of his message, Ipu-wer places the responsibility for the disasters that had come over Egypt on the king. Some find a parallel here with the words of Nathan to David, 'Thou art the man' (cf., n. 38, ANET, p. 443.)

Comment:

While there may be some slight degree of formal similarity between certain features of this text and certain features of the Old Testament prophetic literature, they are so slight as to hardly be worth serious consideration as a basis for suggesting any connection between the two.

- 1) It is questionable whether the so called 'messianic section' is even speaking of the future.
- 2) Even if it is speaking of the future, there is a complete difference in the messianic concept in the Old Testament and in Ipu-wer. In the Old Testament the coming king will bring his people into fellowship with God and restore peace and harmony in the whole earth. This sort of universal eschatological vision rooted in spiritual realities is not found here or elsewhere in extra-biblical literature.
- 3) The analogy between the message of Ipu-wer and the message of Israel's prophets consists at the most in this, that just as Israel's prophets sometimes give descriptions of the distress that has come on the land, and place the responsibility on the king, so here does Ipu-wer. But that is all, and that is not particularly significant.

There is no hint of God's purposeful and sovereign direction of all of human history.

b. The Prophecy of Nefer-rohu (Neferti), ANET pp 444-446.

Another text pointed to for an analogy to Israel's prophets is an alleged 'prophecy' of the fall of the Old Kingdom in Egypt and its restoration under Amen-em-het I, given by a nam named Nefer-rohu (or Neferti).

Amen-em-het I is dated at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom period, 12th dynasty, ca., 1910 B.C.

According to the text, Snefru (of the 4th dynasty, ca., 2650 B.C.) asks the city council of the capital city if there was someone who could entertain him with fine words and well chosen speeches.

The name of Nefer-rohu is given. He was a priest of Bastet, the cat goddess of Bubastis in the eastern half of the Delta. The king commanded that he be brought to the court.

When he appears the king tells him that he wants to hear something about things that are to come. Nefer-rohu begins to describe the conditions of the land and its calamities, and then says (p. 445): "I shall speak of what is before my face; I cannot foretell what has not yet come." He continues then to describe conditions in the land. But finally he says: (p. 445) "then it is that a king will come, belonging to the south, Ameni the triumphant is his name . . ." Then the enemies will be driven out, and justice will come, and wrong doing will be done away with. S

For comments on this text see:

1) E. J. Young, **CC p. 5**

Besides these considerations there is serious question about the authenticity of the document. Albright calls it "the oldest certain example of a *vaticinium ex eventu* since it purports to date from the reign of Snefru of the Fourth Dynasty" (cf. 2650 B.C), but describes events from about 1900 B.C., six centuries later. The oldest copies (ca., 1450 B.C.) go back to about five centuries after the time it purports to predict.

See: G. V. Smith, **CC p. 5** and W. F. Albright, **CC p. 5**

3. Canaanite analogies

Canaanite analogies have also been sought for Israel's prophetism, but as yet none have been found. Even the findings at Rash Shamra, the old city

of Ugarit, have not provided anything that is analogous to Israel's prophets.

Yet many Old Testament scholars remain convinced that Canaan must be considered the cradle of Israel's prophetism. A. Keunen recognizes the lack of historical documentation, but speaks of a 'probable conjecture' that Israel's prophetism has its origins in Canaan. **See CC p. 5-6.**

G. Von Rad takes a similar position: **see CC p. 6.**

The idea that prophetism was known in Canaanite religion is strengthened for some by what we know of the Phoenicians, who were closely related to the Canaanites in ethical and religious practices. I Kings 18:19ff. tells of the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Ashera introduced into Israel by Jezebel, Ahab's Phoenician wife. When Elijah challenged them to the contest on Mt. Carmel (1 Kgs 18:26-29), the heathen prophets called on their god, danced around the altar and cut themselves with knives and 'prophesied' (v. 29 - here probably indicative of ecstatic behavior of some sort).

From another Egyptian text entitled "The Journey of Wen-Among" many have concluded that this type of religious ecstasy was also known in Phoenicia. This text tells a travel story of an Egyptian priest of the temple Among in Karnak whose name was Wen-Among. He set out in the 5th year of Rameses II (ca., 1100 B.C.) to purchase lumber for the construction of the ceremonial barge of the Egyptian deity Among-Re (this barge was to be his throne in the form of a ship). The story shows that Egypt was weak at this time from the humiliating treatment the Egyptian envoy received in Syria.

The coming of the priest was not welcomed by the king of Byblos and the price Wen-Among wanted to pay for the lumber was not acceptable, so he was told to leave and go back to Egypt. He could not do this immediately because the ship on which he came had already departed. The king of Byblos was caused to change his mind, however, when (p. 18) 'the god seized one of his youths and made him possessed. And he said to him: 'Bring up [the] god! Bring the messenger who is carrying him! Among is the one who sent him out! He is the one who made him come!' And while the possessed [youth] was having his frenzy on this night, I had (already) found a ship headed for Egypt and had loaded everything that I had into it.' He was told to wait, however, and finally an agreement is worked out for the sale of the lumber.

This incident in the Journey of Wen-Among has been termed by some an example of 'prophetic frenzy,' and this, combined with the behavior of the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18, and the prophetic bands in the time of

Samuel is said to demonstrate the origin of prophetism in Israel from ecstatic Canaanite antecedents.

Canaan is thus said to be the cradle of prophetism in Israel, and Samuel as the leader of the ecstatic prophets is then said to be the person who adapted this originally heathen phenomena to Israel. This, theory, however, is largely speculative, and hardly fits with Samuel's opposition to the influence of Canaanite religion in Israel as reported in 1 Samuel 3-7.

4. Conclusion

While there are a few formal similarities between 'prophecy' outside Israel and Israel's prophets, there is little that is even remotely comparable in the area of material correspondence. So the attempt to explain the origin of Israel's prophetism from analogies outside Israel is hardly convincing. The origin of Israel's prophetism must be sought elsewhere.